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AP Literature P.5

03/03/12

An Era’s Seclusion in Pope

Alexander Pope’s *Ode on Solitude* is a reflection of his inner desire to detach from the bustle of civilization and discover the fulfilling satisfaction of seclusion. After a review of his works, several literary critics deemed his poems as “petty and ill-advised (Alexander).” Humans are communal creatures by nature. The suggestion to split apart for the sake self-realization seemed counterintuitive at the time. Most would have dismissed *Ode on Solitude* as the illogical wishes of a young Pope and/or an attempt to ignore the 1700s era of romantic themes. However, current critics have reversed this label on Pope’s style. Experts now muse that the poet might have expressed ideologies that were ahead of his time, thus resulting in his past derision and current praise (Alexander).

In the first verse, Pope starts about the happiness and joy experienced by a person who is not burdened by the societal propriety. The line begins with “Happy the man…” (1.1), which develops as a main theme for the poem: what makes a people (and Pope) “happy men.” The peace and freedom one feels when “content to breathe his native air” (1.3), in other words, when blessed with solitude, grants discharge from oneself and the social graces most consider a necessity.

The second stanza adds on to the first by listing the benefits of thriving as a single being. The right to do as one pleases and when compares to no other. Pope expresses joy in all that does not concern with what society thinks, or what the norms are. Never mind modesty and etiquette. Pope depicts the happy man as who can derive pleasure from the simple necessities of life: food “bread” (1.5), clothes “flocks” (1.6), and shelter “trees” (1.7). To be extravagant and brazen would satisfy the voracious and fickle pit of self-appreciation due to peer approval. Pope, on the other hand, views the possession of humble provisions, such simple things that the average farmer would consider meager, as the only true source of happiness. The society of then and today commonly looks down on people like that and sees them as people of inconsequence and misinformed.

By the third stanza, Pope claims that, not only do the well-secluded people live happier lives, but very possibly healthier ones as well. Pope backs this statement by indicating that solitude lacks the stress induced by the society and people in general. Without the commonplace duties of civilization; responding to others, disruptions and distractions, complications in relationships, one is free to explore his or her opportunities to discover the full development of the self, both physically and personally. To the poet, to life live without concerns is a blessing, as he exclaims “Blest!” (1.9). To avoid what reigns as the norm of society is to live life in leisure as time passes at a much more relaxed pace.

Pope provides a more specific example of what an isolated life should be like in the fourth verse. The poet illustrates this path of leisure with an alliteration of soft “s” words: "Sound sleep by night; study…sweet.” (1.13-14). The suggestion of participating in seemingly mindless recreation as a supplement to sage study may seem contradictory at first. However, Pope’s theme is not to become irresponsible or lazy. Pope acknowledges that every man supports a desire for knowledge and encourages a solitary lifestyle because the absence of peer competition stimulates mental growth. The poet suggests that, in order to achieve intellectual excellence, the pursuit of knowledge must be a result of curiosity. This is not a luxury that communal people can often afford, and public rules dictate that the merit of one’s education must be constantly tested. If a student does not enjoy receiving knowledge, then he or she is not actually learning. Pope concludes that self-instigated meditation can bring about a utopian understanding of lessons if conducted alone and in contemplation of self-sought information.

In a sudden shift in narration from third to first person, Pope closes his poem with a quatrain of his own personal desires isolation might provide. The final verse conveys his longing for such a life, a life free of people and their ills, a life in the little farm with sheep and trees to substantiate him, not the cold metal of coin and house. To not live in silence is to not live, as he pleads for solitude, “Thus let me live, unseen, unknown.” (1.17). Even as a recognized poet of his time, he claims no need to be known or celebrated (Information). He yearns for a solitude so absolute that his existence goes undetected, so that his memory is not remembered by anybody. "Steal from the world, and not a stone Tell where I lye.” (1.19-20). Ironically, his name has gone down in history as the personification of the Augustan Age (Information).

Works Cited

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